

# SLA Theories and Language Education: An Attempt of Application to Teaching Russian

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According to the survey of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), Russian courses provided at high schools and higher education in Japan decreased more than 40 during 2002 to 2014 (Hayashida, 2017). Hayashida(2017) explored the reasons of the decrease and suggested some solutions from the perspectives of Russian education as an international language which includes changing views of teachers toward language teaching, developing materials which enable to support specific academic purposes and collaboration with teachers of other fields. In addition to these, the author, an SLA researcher and the false beginner of Russian, proposes the application of SLA findings to improve the Russian language education in Japanese universities. In this short paper, the author attempts to apply findings of SLA to Russian language education at universities in Japan. First, brief history of SLA and some findings will be introduced, then her model of second language development which the author utilizes as a map to design language learning classes and a lesson plan for the first Russian language class based on SLA will be shared.

## SLA Theories and Language Teaching Methods

Second language acquisition (SLA) is one of the fields of applied linguistics which study second language learning. The fundamental questions of SLA are "how learners come to internalize the linguistic system of another language and how they make use of that linguistic system during comprehension and speech production" (Vanpatten&Benati, 2015, p.2). To address these questions, SLA should be an interdisciplinary field and contains psychology, cognitive psychology, and education. The focus of the SLA is language learning and learners by definition, however, language teachers can draw some pedagogical implications from the findings of SLA. Besides, language teaching methods and findings of SLA research are interrelated in many ways. For the readers' benefit,

briefly looking back at the history of SLA research.

### Brief History of SLA

The first publication of SLA research is S. Pit Corder's essay "The Significance of Learners' Errors" in 1967 and followed by Larry Selinker's "Interlanguage" published in 1972. At the beginning of SLA research, the main focus was learners' errors and interlanguage. In the 1980s, Krashen proposed Monitor Theory including well known Input Hypothesis,  $i + 1$ , the affective filter. Monitor Theory focuses heavily on 'input' and distinct language learning versus language acquisition. According to Krashen, people can develop two separate linguistic systems; acquired (based on unconscious and implicit learning) and learned (based on conscious and explicit learning). After the era of input, Output Hypothesis and Interaction Hypothesis came in the 1990s. Output Hypothesis is influenced by the connectionism which also rooted in the idea of Universal Grammar. Also idea of input processing and Sociocultural Theory followed (Vanpatten & Benati, 2015). The 2000s and beyond is the era of continuous expansion of the fields which related to the SLA research. Cognitive neuroscience and neurolinguistics are relatively new fields added to the plate of SLA research together with the Complexity Theory (CT). CT is a metatheory that emerged among physical sciences like chemistry, biology and meteorology around 1960s (Larsen-Freeman, 2017). Larsen-Freeman (1997) argued that the language learning can be regarded as a complex dynamical adaptive system and CT is applicable framework for SLA research as well. CT also gives new perspectives on SLA research, and Larsen-Freeman (2017) now prefers to say 'language development' rather than 'language acquisition'.

### Methods of Language Teaching

As mentioned above, findings of SLA research gave implications of language teaching, and yielded language teaching methods. However, before SLA, two contradicting methods were born. Grammar Translation Method came first and still one of the dominant way of learning the second language (L2). Actually, this method rooted no theory nor hypotheses. Thus many learners (and teachers) believe that language learning is all about memorizing words/phrases and grammatical rules, and translation is the only way of comprehension. Next came the Direct Method that claims the second language learning should be natural just like the first language. According to the Direct Method, no translation between first and second language is needed to master another language, and grammar rules should be learned by a lot of oral interaction and use of language. The Direct Method was popular in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1950s, Audiolingual Method was first appeared as Army Method that was a collaboration of structural linguists and behavioristic psychologists right after the World War II. This is based on linguistic and psychological theory. Other methods like Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, Community Language Learning, The Natural Approach, Suggestopedia and Communicative Language

Teaching, all of the methods are grounded on language learning theories based on SLA research, and theories of learning drew by the findings of psychology/cognitive linguistics. In addition, each method takes different perspectives on the roles of learner, teacher and materials.

### Complex Theory (CT) and an SLA model

Now is called as the post method era, which means all the methods are developed so teachers should choose the right methods that matches the purpose and objectives of the course. Besides, CT and neuroscience are giving new perspectives and understanding of language learning. For instance;

- Language development is not linear.
- Language development needs implicit and explicit learning.

The figure 1 is an SLA model developed from the research on implicit language learners that used CT as the framework of research (Hori, 2016). The author uses the model when she plans language lessons or reflects on language learning of herself. One of the important findings is 'input' includes 'image' or 'visual input'. Also, when the input includes two types of input, learner can easily comprehend or can learn the language effectively. For example, when preparing materials, effective use of visual aid is always a top priority of considerations.

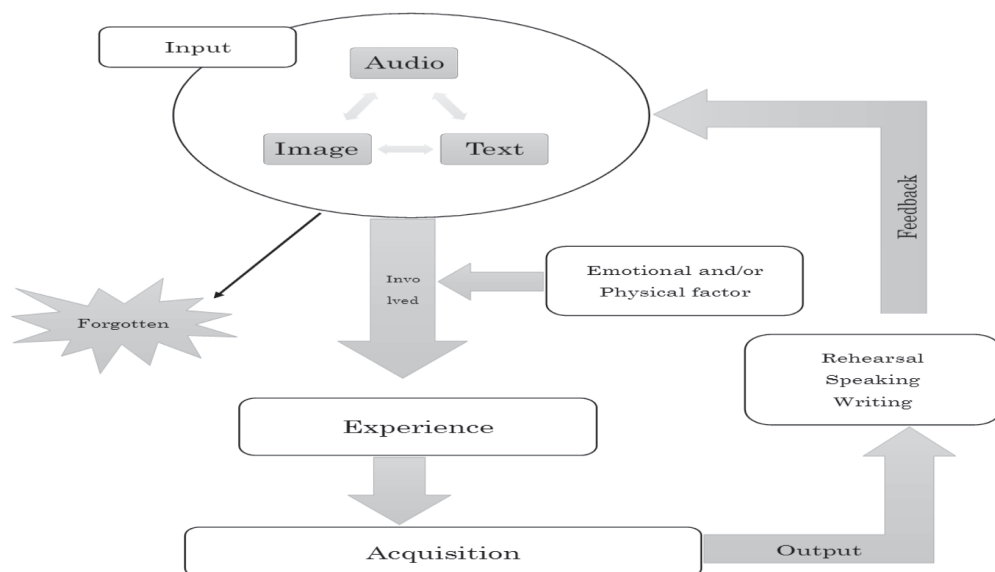


Figure 1. SLA Model Based on the Trajectories of the Implicit Language Learners

*Note.* The Implicit Language Learners (ILL) are the learners who heavily depending on extensive reading and listening, like the Natural Approach.

## Application of SLA Findings for Russian Language Classroom

To apply SLA theories into language classroom, the teacher needs to decide which methodologies and pedagogies might go well with the purpose and objectives of the course. In addition, course design should consist of activities, materials, the sequence of the lessons appropriate for the learners' level, age, preferences and so forth. Moreover, community building among students and teacher is also important factor of classroom teaching. In short, a deliberate plan which tells you what, when and how to teach should be needed before getting into the classroom (see Appendix I, Appendix II).

### Classroom as a Community

One of the perspectives which CT brought to the SLA research is new perspectives on the relationship between teacher and students. Since CT encourages to see holistically, and everything is connected and interacting dynamically, for example, teacher is also a part of the community of learners. Thus building a good community in the classroom is one of the important factors of language.

### Components of Lesson Plan

**Purpose and objectives.** A language teacher may just start from teaching alphabet from the first class if she follows a textbook. Then move on to the grammar points which regarded as 'easy' and 'important'. However, if you design a course based-on SLA findings, considering when and how to start teaching letters or grammatical items in line with the overall purpose and objectives of the course will be necessary. Moreover, each lesson also needs specific purpose and objectives.

**Materials.** Materials should be level appropriate in terms of language, but at the same time, contents should be suitable for the learners' preferences and purposes of the course. Compared to the textbooks of English, the textbook of Russian is limited in variety, however, because of the progress of digital devices and ICT, many kinds of materials are available for learners these days. For instance, learners can watch thousands of videos on YouTube including Russian TV shows and music videos. Smartphone apps are also available in Russian. For example, the author uses the audiobook app and enjoys reading and listening to the Russian books with reasonable price. In this paper the author chose the cartoon program "Маша и Медведь" for the lesson plan which tries to apply findings of SLA to Russian classroom (Appendix I). The reasons are 1. the show is very popular, 2. limited language spoken in the show, 3. subtitles are available.

**Organization.** When the author was a graduate student of TESOL, my teacher always asked us "Why do you want to do that?" Now she asks the same question by herself when she plans a lesson; Whether the activity is appropriate for the purpose of the lesson? The timing of the activity is right?

Or no students left behind? You might be surprised to see the timing and variety of activities included in one lesson (Appendix I, Appendix II). The reason is that the author prefers to finish an activity less than 20 minutes to maintain the level of concentration during class time.

**Learner autonomy.** Autonomous learning is regarded as a key component of effective language learning, so teachers should consider how to develop autonomy among students. According to Benson (2013), autonomy is an attribute of the learner's approach to the learning process, thus applicable for any level. Teachers can guide and develop autonomous learners by giving learners opportunities to control their learning.

## Conclusion

In this paper, application of findings of SLA research into Russian language classroom was attempted by the author. Since the author is not a Russian teacher, this plan might not work at all, but she appreciates this challenging opportunity and hopes that this attempt can inspire the readers to some extent. For more information about SLA research and classroom teaching, the author recommends further reading: *Second Language Acquisition Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching* (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012) and *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

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## Appendix I

### A Lesson Plan for the First Russian Class

Purpose/Objectives of the Lesson			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To build community</li> <li>• To develop phonological skills necessary for listening and speaking</li> <li>• To introduce Slavic alphabet</li> </ul>			
Time	Activity	Purpose/Objectives	Material / Equipment
0:00	Ice Breaker (15) (Two-line conversation) "Менязовут ~" *Only audio and meaning of the phrase. Don't teach letters yet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To build community.</li> <li>• Personalize the learning.</li> </ul>	
0:15	Watch an episode of children's show without audio (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To elicit background knowledge of Ss</li> <li>• Involve emotionally</li> </ul>	YouTube "Маша и Медведь" S1Ep1 / Big Pad, PC
0:20	Discuss the story with a partner (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To elicit and build background knowledge of Ss</li> <li>• To build a bond among students</li> </ul>	
0:25	Watch the video again with audio (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To learn Russian implicitly through dual coding (auditory and visual input)</li> <li>• Preparation for auditory input and output</li> </ul>	
0:30	Learn vocabulary and phrases (20) - Quizlet cards (Russian and Japanese) - Teach alphabets (unfamiliar letters) and pronunciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To learn Russian explicitly (Vocabulary, alphabets, pronunciation)</li> </ul>	Quizlet, Hand out (list of vocabulary and phrases) Textbook (table of alphabets)
0:50	Write names in Russian alphabet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personalize learning</li> </ul>	Name tags
0:55	Watch the video (in parts) (20) - Stop the video and repeat lines together - Ask Ss about the meaning of the lines - Practice useful phrases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meta-cognitive skills</li> <li>• Explicit learning</li> <li>Pronunciation</li> </ul>	
0:75	Shadowing (10) - Make them as Masha and practice shadowing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fluency development</li> <li>• Pronunciation</li> </ul>	
0:85	Announce Homework (5) - Quizlet 1. Register and 2. Join to the class, 3. play "Match game"		Smartphone

*Note.* The lesson time is set as 90 minutes. Estimated students' profile is freshmen, participants of mandatory Russian course.

## Appendix II

### Guide for the Sample Lesson Plan

This is a step by step guide for the sample lesson plan by the author (Appendix I). Before move on to the details of the plan, the background of this guide will be discussed in terms of three aspects; 1. Russian teachers in Japan, 2. students' profile of this course, 3. author's profile and the purpose of the course. The latter part of this guide explains how to conduct activities, intention or purpose of each activity, and how to prepare and utilize materials.

### Background

**Teachers of Russian language courses in Japan.** English teachers had received a certain amount of education in teaching English and learn introductory level of SLA. On the contrary, the third language teachers in Japanese universities merely received education to be language teachers. In most cases, they are scholars of other fields who are good at Russian language or native-speakers of Russian. In general, teachers of the third languages are professors whose specialty is not teaching language. The author searched the background of the faculty members who teach Russian at several Japanese universities and found that mere chances are having Russian teachers who have a background of language teaching or language learning. Majority of the Russian teachers are scholars who study Russian literature, language, economics, journalism and so forth, or native speakers.

**Students' profile of Russian language courses.** In Japan, English is a dominant second language taught at secondary school and higher education. Japanese learners start learning third languages from the higher education in general. Since this sample lesson is the first Russian lesson, participants of the class might be freshmen of undergraduate students, class size around n=30, mixed gender. According to a survey, learners of Russian (n=1114) are intrinsic motivated but unsatisfied with the outcome of the effort. The survey was participated more than 17,000 teachers and learners of German, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Korean at universities and high schools in Japan (Hayashida, 2017). So the author thinks that the students will be able to take a little challenge if they could see worth doing it. In addition, smartphones and laptops/PC are available because they are undergraduate students.

**Author's profile and the purpose of this (imaginary) course.** The author took Russian classes for two years when she was a undergraduate student. Very motivated but a unsuccessful learner. She has MA in TESOL, a Complexity explorer and a researcher of SLA whose interest is Mind, Brain and Education. This imaginary course is intended to be practical, enjoyable, and giving concrete

fundamental skills of Russian language.

### Activities and Materials

**Ice breaker.** Ice breaker is needed to start a lesson smoothly. Since an ice breaker is intended to prepare students to communicate and collaborate in the classroom, any activity that is easy and enjoyable can be an ice breaker.

In this lesson, two-line conversation was used. The teacher can introduce herself in Russian with action; pointing at herself and saying "Меня зовут (name)". Then ask students' name by pointing at themselves, make them repeat after her. Students can guess what's happening there, and will understand easily what "Меня зовут ~" means. Once students understood the phrase, make them introduce themselves by using two-line conversation. Since this is an ice breaker, after exchange names, students are allowed to talk in Japanese about their faculty, hometown, club and so on.

**Two-line conversation.** Two-line conversation is suitable for small talk or practicing a certain expression. This is very simple activity and you can use it when the class size is not too big. Firstly, make your students stand-up and make two lines. Then let them speak for 1 minute or 2, and one student at the end or first of a line will change his / her place. For this lesson plan, students practice the phrase "Меня зовут". Students can practice the phrase and know each other's name at the same time. By doing this activity at the first class, you can show your students that the class is intended to be practical and speaking is one of the important factors.

**Watch an episode of children's TV show without audio.** The author chose an episode of Russian TV show for the class because the video is available on YouTube, relatively short in length, and the show is very popular. Moreover, since the program is a cartoon for younger children, the story is simple and easy to comprehend even without words. Watching a video without audio before listening is one of the techniques for teaching listening which provide prior knowledge and enhance comprehension. From the perspectives of neuroscience, image (visual information) is also an input for brain (see Figure 1).

**Discuss the story with partners.** After watching the video, students will talk about the story with partners in Japanese. There are two purposes of the discussion. One is making bond among students by exchanging what they saw in the video. Another purpose is to elicit students' background knowledge which affect comprehension of language.

**Watch the video again with audio.** Now that the students comprehend the outline of the story, watch the video again with audio. This activity is aimed for the preparation to develop phonological skills; listening and pronunciation.

**Learn vocabulary and phrases.** Teach some words and phrases in the lines. Also you can pick up some nouns related to the things which frequently appeared in the video. In this lesson plan, 'медведь' 'ещё' 'домой' 'здорово' 'мама' can be taught at the first class. Because these words are basic and easy



to comprehend the meaning from the scenes.

**Quizlet.** Quizlet is an application for making flash cards. This is easy to use and free, works on PC and smartphone too. The author prefer Quizlet rather than paper flash cards because you can add pictures to the cards very easily. Another reason is that you can check pronunciation of words by one tap/click on the cards. Moreover, variety of activities are available, and teachers can share sets of flash cards called 'study set' to the students by making class(es) and inviting the students to the class.

**Teach alphabet and pronunciation.** At this point, no need to teach all the letters in the alphabet. You can prepare by checking students' first name, and teach letters appear in those names. Also you don't need to teach letters which students already know; only those are different from English alphabet which all the students would already know. Probably, you can refer to the textbook or give a table of alphabet for further learning.

**Write their names in Russian alphabet.** Here, students write their first names on the name tag which will be used through the course. By doing this, the learning alphabet can be a personalized learning opportunity and become a meaningful experience of using Russian.

**Watch the video again, teach explicitly.** Play the video again, and stop it at the point you want to teach the words/phrases explicitly. In this lesson, you don't need to teach all the words and phrases. Rather only focusing on several vocabulary which are useful for daily conversation would be beneficial for learners.

**Shadowing.** Shadowing is one of the fluency development activities as well as pronunciation practice widely spread among English learners in Japan. Since this is the first attempt, just experiencing the activity might be enough. The point is that students need to mimic not only lines but prosody (and the feelings) as well. Shadowing also needs to be introduced and practiced repeatedly in class and eventually make it as homework/self-learning.

**Homework.** In this plan, register to the Quizlet, join to the class and play "Match game" are homework. Disadvantage of using online application and/or smartphone app is that it will take some time before students get used to it. Actually, registration and joining to the class are not so difficult tasks, but for some students, it is not. If you make this step as homework, more class time will be needed.

